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## MY EXPERIENCE WITH BUSINESS ENGLISH<sup>1</sup>

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Somewhat over two years ago, there were added to the curriculum of the Chicago high schools several two-year vocational courses, which included a subject called "business English." Just what this was to be and how it was to vary from regular English the teachers who were asked to handle the subject were not informed. For a time each went his own way, trying to find sensible solutions for the many problems presented by the course. More than a year later, several of these teachers met and formulated the results of their experience in a simple brief outline of topics. These included spelling, punctuation, correct usage of words, oral themes, business letters, and reading.

From a survey of these topics, the opinion would be readily formed that business English does not differ from the ordinary English. No great difference does exist in the branches taught, but there is a difference in the method of teaching. Here there is more simplicity, more dependence upon drill, a change in emphasis, and more connection between books and business practice. Just how these changes were to be worked out was left to the individual teacher, as the outline was intended to be merely suggestive. This it has remained to the present day, as it has received the sanction of no higher authority. Hence the teacher who is assigned business English to teach is in the somewhat bewilderingly delightful situation of handling a subject unhampered by the dictates of an adopted syllabus as to what to teach, and unfettered by the tradition of long years as to how to teach it. Such a situation is both stimulating and alarming, especially as the business pupils have only two years in high school, and should be so trained that they can become efficient workers and responsible citizens.

<sup>1</sup> A paper read before the High School Section of the National Council of Teachers of English, November 29, 1913.

My own experience with the subject has been increasingly satisfactory. This has come in large degree from the fact that the pupils have shown that they themselves think the work is worth while. The purpose of their study here is immediate, and this fact calls forth sustained effort and continued interest, even in drill lessons in grammar. Furthermore, I have eagerly welcomed a chance to simplify and lessen my class requirements. The longer I teach the surer I am that we ask too many kinds of things at once from children. Repeated failures show this, but we continue onward adding to our curriculum, instead of rejudging, and rearranging or subtracting. Perhaps our long experience with failures has made us believe that we shall always have them with us. Probably we shall have thousands of these unfortunates until society insists that children be born right and brought up in the same way, but many partial failures are turned to some success by giving them something that, even to them, seems to fit them to earn a living. In Wendell Phillips High School, the year following the introduction of our vocational courses, our enrolment of boys jumped from 40 to 60 per cent of the total attendance. Such a result must make a deep impression on any teacher who is saddened by the enormous human waste today, and make her feel it a privilege to teach business English.

Now as to the details of my daily work. Here I have found certain advantages to come from the mere name given to the course. For one thing, there was afforded a new coign of vantage from which to launch comments on work handed in. When careless letters came, I could say, "Would you send this through the mails to a customer?" or "Would you hire an applicant who wrote this hand?" Frequently the pupil sees the futility of attempting to justify his product, and takes it away to recopy, without waiting for my ultimatum. From the tenor of such comments, the boys gradually grow to examine a letter from two points of view, one, that of the seller; the other, that of the buyer; or one, that of the applicant for a position; the other, that of the employer. In time he may become able to step out and look at himself. Such an effort widens his ideas, and sharpens his critical faculties.

In the grammar work, most of the time has been spent in drilling

on correct forms, and grammatical principles have been recalled only as they are needed to settle a point of difference. Punctuation work has been based on grammar and particular marks justified by whole or partial analysis of the sentences involved.

In oral themes there has been a persistent effort to make the work practical. Pupils have impersonated agents and have attempted to sell me hand-painted china, roller skates, religious papers, and vacuum cleaners; they have applied to me for positions, or have attempted to borrow money from me to start a small business. To the best of my limited ability I have been, in turn, the discriminating housewife, the shrewd business man, and the intelligent philanthropist. Early in the recitation, however, these parts are also turned over to the pupils, who enter into the recitation with some of the gusto with which they play a game. The members of the class not reciting at any time are expected to be ready with comments on manner, language, and information.

At other times résumés of articles in the *World's Work*, the *American Magazine*, the *Technical World*, and *System* are given, and are followed by general discussion. These reports may be unified by being chosen because they show what efforts are being made to improve social and industrial conditions, or because they show what qualities have led to success in the cases of individual men. The result of such recitations is to broaden the ideas of the pupils and free them from the belief that petty tricks or clever dishonesty lead to lasting success. Further, the pupils recognize and admire the nobility of that kind of success which is not the consequence of the mere ability to make money but which follows the desire to serve humanity.

Recently I have tried, with much interest, the experiment of having each pupil tell what he would do to earn a living if he were suddenly thrown upon his own resources; at what he would work, how much he could probably earn, and where he would live. Then the wages for a year were apportioned for a year to food, lodging, carfare, clothes, insurance, incidentals, and amusements. The expenditure for clothes had to be subdivided and set aside for hats, shoes, suits, underwear, gloves, etc. The pupils not reciting at any given time kept tab on the speaker to see if he gave any

improbable figures, or if he failed to make his several amounts harmonize. In a number of cases, the amounts for amusements had to be cut down, and with some of the girls the cost of lunches had to be raised.

In looking back at the exercise, I feel that it was a good one, as it must have given some of the pupils their first idea of a personal budget. One boy told me very seriously that he had not had any idea how much he was costing his parents.

In the written work, the unit is the business letter, and I have come to believe that it is an excellent one. First, it is brief enough for the pupils to grasp it as a whole, see the connection between the paragraphs and their relation to the entire letter. Further, it furnishes that similarity which allows for intelligent comparison and yet presents sufficient variety to forestall a deadening of interest. On account of their brevity many letters can be read in a single period, and the discussion of them leads to the recognition of superior clearness, originality, or courtesy wherever they occur.

Though there is variety in the letters, still many of the same ideas need to be said again and again. This leads to a conscious effort toward variety of expression. Stereotyped phrases are soon greeted with derision, and equally prompt admiration is awarded to the new or neat way of expressing a common idea. The ordinary American child is not much given to considering choice of words a serious matter, but when he confronts an imaginary situation in which he as a credit man is to refuse to ship goods to a new customer on a credit basis and retain that order on a cash one, he feels the necessity of knowing how to word a refusal so deftly that it has the sound of a compliment. It must not be thought, because the business letter is brief and somewhat limited in scope, that writing one is an easy task. Fitting a letter nicely to a given situation demands judgment, accuracy, knowledge of human nature, imagination, and sympathy.

In other years when handling the discussion of a set of themes, I have felt impelled to attack so many kinds of errors that I have seemed to be firing a shotgun at bears generally. In contrast with the theme, the business letter offers an opportunity for a smaller variety of errors. Among those exhibited, however, some have a

more than cat-like tenacity of life, but since there are fewer of them, we have time to take each one separately and kill it so many times that it will finally stay dead.

Through these repeated operations, pupils grow to the sense of having conquered some of the enemies that beset them, and feel a delight in their increasing ability to do a thing well. This makes them more and more capable of self-criticism. I have endeavored to stimulate this by indicating the position of an error in a general way only. So there is some room for exercising initiative in the revising of a letter. If this is done accurately and completely the letter is awarded a stamp of "Accepted," in red ink.

To those teachers who find trouble in having work rewritten and corrected, I would suggest the use of such a stamp. Judging from my own experience, I am compelled to believe that the price of a stamp on a letter is far above that of rubies. Scarcely a pupil but is eager to acquire all of them that he can, and the possession of a notebook stamped up to date is like a rock in a shifting world, in whose stability its owner may rest, undisturbed by the class discussions of back work, and unttempted by the enticing claims of idleness. You see, a notebook at present stamped up to date is a force that constantly acts on its owner to keep it so in the future.

In literature our work is determined by the fact that two years of business English counts as two years of regular English in a four-year course. The authorities wisely wished to make it easy for a pupil to change from the two-year course to a longer one if, after entering, he found himself able to do so. Hence these business pupils must be ready to take the regular third-year work.

Our time on literature is less than that given in the regular classes; in my own case one period a week on an average is given to class discussion and reading of books. In this brief space, you can readily see, there is no time for intensive study. We try to understand the main threads of the narrative and get an idea of the qualities and motives of the characters. Most of the emphasis is laid on the human side and there is some discussion of the economic conditions. With such books as *Ivanhoe* and the *Tale of Two Cities*, an attempt at comparison of the earlier times with our own is made,

in an effort to discover whether or not conditions are better today, or if there has been a change of masters only.

Some teachers may question the advisability of incorporating the study of literature with business English. From my own small knowledge of practical affairs, I consider such a combination a wise one. The successful business man needs a wide vocabulary, broad social experience, an intelligent historical and economic perspective, the ability to read human nature, and a mental suppleness that will encourage the acquisition and generation of new ideas. All of these are materially improved by a wide acquaintance with good books and magazines, and though, with the limited amount of time in business English, we can introduce the pupils to only a few good authors and periodicals, yet we should certainly do this to the best of our ability.